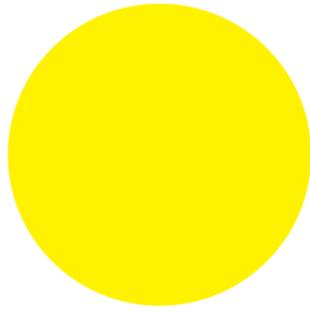


Iran's tourism could be second largest industry after oil: **VP**



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Shias, Hezbollah cannot be disregarded in Lebanon

By Sadeq Dehqan
Staff writer

INTERVIEW

At long last, Lebanon put an end to its leadership void by electing Joseph Aoun as the country's president after more than two years. The development is a crucial step toward resolving the political crisis and filling the power vacuum at the helm of the executive branch.

Since 2022, Lebanon has been without a president, which has led to various political and social challenges. During this period, the country was steered by Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

The presidential tenure in Lebanon is six years and an individual can only serve one term. After the six-year period, the presidential palace must be vacated, regardless of whether a successor has been elected or not.

After several failed voting attempts in the Lebanese Parliament to elect a president, lawmakers representing various factions finally reached an agreement on Thursday, electing 61-year-old Aoun, a former army chief and Maronite Christian, to the top post. Some see him as an independent and non-partisan figure. Despite American support for his candidacy, the Shia movement Hezbollah did not stand in the way of his election. In fact, the withdrawal of Suleiman Frangieh, the candidate endorsed by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, cleared the path for General Aoun to ascend to the presidency.

In his inaugural speech, Aoun described his election as a watershed in Lebanon's history and that his country was embarking on a new chapter.

To shed more light on Aoun's presidency, Iran Daily sought the insights of Emad Abshenas, a political analyst in international and Lebanese affairs. The following is the transcript of the interview:

IRAN DAILY: The process to pick a president in Lebanon dragged on for more than two years before a decision was finally made.

ABSHENAS: As you know, Lebanon has a unique political structure, with power divided among different ethnicities and religions. Consequently, the presidency must be held by a Maronite Christian; even representatives from other Christian denominations, such as the Orthodox, cannot run for the position. This significantly limits the pool of potential candidates. In Lebanon's parliamentary system, the president is not elected directly by the people but rather through a parliamentary vote. Typically, Lebanese parliamentarians are influenced by party affiliations and, at times, foreign interests. Given this context, electing a president in Lebanon has always been fraught with challenges, with few individuals having the capability to secure the necessary votes.

In the current parliament, the Phalangist-aligned groups were pushing for Samir Geagea to become president. Hezbollah and the Amal Movement initially threw their weight behind Suleiman Frangieh. Likewise, the Sunni community and other factions had their own candidates. As a result, each time a vote was held in the parliament, the votes were split and no candidate could secure a majority.

Ultimately, Joseph Aoun managed to gain secure the majority of votes through an agreement with Hezbollah and Amal. Lawmakers from Hezbollah and Amal's parliamentary blocs met with Aoun in recent days and reached a consensus, resulting in a deal that prompted Suleiman Frangieh's withdrawal from the race and allowing Aoun to garner the necessary votes.

You mentioned the influence of foreign powers on the Lebanese parliament. Which specific countries are pulling the strings?

Lebanon often finds itself at the crossroads of multiple foreign influences. Historically, France and Saudi Arabia held considerable sway. In the current geopolitical landscape, Iran and the United States also play pivotal roles. The Lebanese Shia community aligns itself with Iran, while the Christians lean toward the US and France. The Sunni Muslims in Lebanon are influenced by Saudi Arabia's patronage. Turkey attempted to gain a foothold at one point but failed to penetrate the Lebanese political landscape, particularly among the Sunni MPs from the north. Both Turkey and Qatar made concerted efforts in this regard but to no avail. However, the United Arab Emirates and, more prominently, Saudi Arabia hold significant sway over the Lebanese Sunnis. Overall, the key foreign players exerting influence on the Lebanese parliament include the US, France, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

The prolonged vacancy in the presidency must have posed challenges for Lebanon. Could you elaborate on the implications of this situation?

It has been over two years—27 months—since Lebanon has had a president. During such times, the government can only carry out routine administrative tasks, but it cannot make any substantial decisions. Throughout this long period, Prime Minister Najib Mikati and his cabinet took measures to ensure the country's basic functioning but they lack the authority to steer the course on various matters.

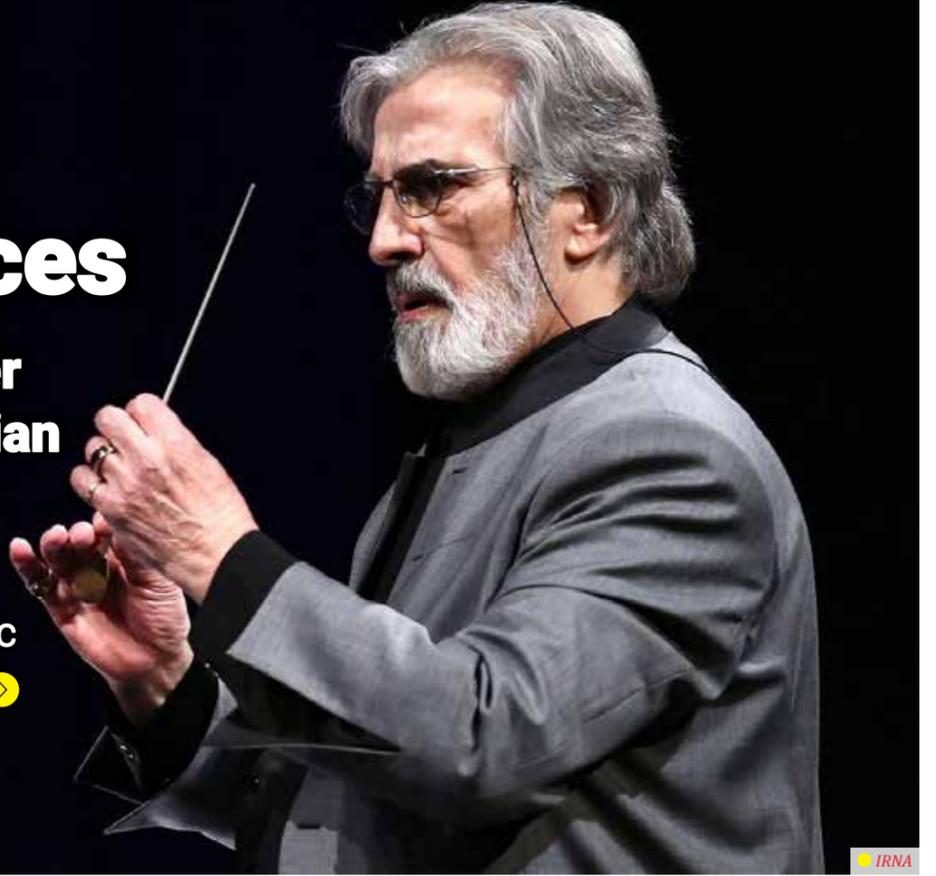
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Creator of Timeless Masterpieces

Legendary composer Fereydoun Shahbazian dies at 82

Pezeshkian: Shahbazian's melodies exalted Iran's music

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IRNA



A view of homes destroyed by fire in Altadena, California on January 09, 2025.
JUSTIN SULLIVAN/AFP

Iran sympathizes with California fires victims, says ready to send aid

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Iran, Russia discuss arrangements for Pezeshkian's visit to Moscow

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15th Khuzestan oil exhibition kicks off in Ahvaz

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15th Khuzestan oil exhibition kicks off in Ahvaz

NIOC announces initiation of gas production from Dey field

The 15th Khuzestan Specialized Exhibition of Petroleum Industry, Equipment, Manufacturing opened in Ahvaz on Saturday.

The event, organized by the National Iranian South Oil Company, the National Iranian Drilling Company, Arvandan Oil and Gas Company, and the Oil Industries Engineering and Construction Company, features dozens of companies from 15 provinces across the country, Shana reported.

A total of 284 domestic companies are participating this year to showcase the latest domestically-manufactured equipment for the oil industry.

The exhibition was inaugurated by Hamid Bovard, the CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), along with several oil industry executives.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of the event, the NIOC head announced that a new daily record for crude gas production was achieved under the current administration.

Bovard added that gas production from the "Dey" field has begun with two wells, and a third well will soon join the production network.

He stated that daily oil production has increased by more than 100,000 barrels over the past four months and that an additional 250,000 barrels per day will be added to the country's oil production capacity by the end of the year, based on current plans.

Bovard highlighted a \$3 billion budget from the National Development Fund allocated for urgent oil production projects, noting that 85% of the budget will be spent in Khuzestan Province, with a portion dedicated to modernizing and renovating oil facilities in the region.

The NIOC CEO also announced that plans for the renovation and modernization of 15 drilling rigs, at a cost of \$1 billion, have been assigned to the National Iranian Drilling Company. He emphasized that President Masoud Pezeshkian's administration has a comprehensive plan to increase oil production.

Bovard noted that crude gas production under the current administration has reached 1.1 billion cubic meters per day. He added that gas production from the Day field has started with two wells, and a third well will soon begin

operations.

Referring to the formation of a new oil civilization in West Karoon and development of oil fields in the area, Bovard said that a \$10 billion integrated development contract for the Azadegan field, approved by the Economic Council, has been awarded to relevant contractors over the past four months, and the implementation phase has already begun. He emphasized the importance of supporting domestic manufacturers in the oil industry, stating that such efforts not only drive industry growth but also serve the nation by advancing economic goals and self-sufficiency.

Bovard likened the support for domestic manufacturers to a strong, deeply-rooted tree that grows more robust over time.

He said this process enhances national capabilities and improves the quality of equipment and services required by the oil industry.

Bovard noted that this year's exhibition features more than 280 companies from across the country, showcasing the extensive capacity and high capabilities of domestic industries in meeting the oil



SHANA

sector's needs.

He added that this participation demonstrates the scientific, technical, and operational expertise of Iranian manufacturers, who are capable of addressing the complex demands of the nation's oil industry.

The deputy oil minister stressed that domestic manufacturers are viewed as key partners, and efforts are ongoing to

facilitate their integration into the oil industry.

He emphasized that close collaboration and sustained cooperation are the foundation for the industry's success and progress.

"Undoubtedly, as domestic manufacturing capabilities grow, the oil industry will reach new heights of development and self-sufficiency," the NIOC head said.

Tehran-Berlin trade rises 4% in 10 months: Chamber head



IRNA

Economy Desk

Shahin Asghari, head of the Iran-Germany Chamber of Commerce and Industry, told ILNA on Saturday that trade between the two sides reached \$1.24 billion in the first 10 months of 2024 (January to October), marking a 4% increase compared to the same period in 2023.

During this time, Iran's imports from Germany grew by 7%, while its exports to Germany declined by 9%. The trade balance remains heavily skewed in Germany's favor, with Iran importing significantly more than it exports.

Asghari noted that while Iran has the potential to supply raw materials for German industries, it has yet to fully capitalize on this opportunity and remains a consumer of German products. Industrial machinery and chemicals are the primary goods Iran imports from Germany, while food and livestock are the main exports from Iran to Germany.

Persian carpets; a luxury in German homes

Reflecting on the history of trade relations, Asghari said that 50 years ago, when the Iran-Germany Chamber of Commerce was established, Iran was the second-largest destination for German exports after the US.

Even after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Germany maintained its trade ties with Iran, consistently ranking as Iran's top European trading partner.

Over the past century, cultural and commercial relations between the two nations have remained strong, with Iran being a familiar market for German industrialists and merchants.

Much of Iran's industrial infrastructure was built using German machinery. However, in recent years, bilateral relations have somewhat weakened.

Asghari emphasized that trade between Iran and Germany continues, with exports from Iran consisting of non-sanctioned goods.

He added that Iranian carpets and handicrafts once held a prominent place in the German market, with Persian carpets being considered as a luxury item and a source of pride for German households.

However, this market has significantly shrunk, with Indian and Turkish exporters now dominating Germany's carpet market. While Iranian pistachios, dates, walnuts, and saffron are still present in Germany, Iran's share of these markets is declining. For instance, Afghanistan is increasingly capturing the global saffron market, including in Germany.

Challenges in Iran-Germany trade

Asghari attributed the decline in trade to a combination of domestic and external factors.

He explained that these challenges are not unique to Iran-Germany trade. For example, in Iraq, a key export destination for Iran, non-Iranian traders sell goods using one-year letters of credit (LCs), while Iranian traders are forced to deal in cash.

This puts Iranian traders at a competitive disadvantage, as Iraqi buyers prefer LCs over cash transactions. Additionally, Iranian traders face currency conversion costs at exchange offices.

Similar challenges exist in Iran's trade with Europe, Asghari stressed, adding that when Iran is unwilling or unable to comply with international trade norms, it loses its share of the global market.

Domestic currency challenges

Asghari highlighted that national currency regulations further burden Iranian traders. Exporters are required to repatriate foreign currency earnings, a practice uncommon elsewhere in the world. This is particularly challenging given the significant gap between the official exchange rate and the free market rate.

He also discussed the impact of Iran's recently launched negotiated currency market, aimed at reducing trade challenges.

Asghari emphasized the importance of narrowing the gap between the free market and official exchange rates, noting that the negotiated market is rooted in the policy of unifying exchange rates. The current multi-tiered exchange rate system has led to racketeering by importers who overstate their import values.

Asghari said the success of the negotiated currency market depends on its ability to move toward a single exchange rate.

Iran's wind power capacity to hit 8,000 MW to meet domestic needs



IRNA

The Ministry of Energy has set a target to increase Iran's wind energy production capacity to 8,000 megawatts as part of a broader plan to achieve 30,000 megawatts of renewable energy (solar and wind) nationwide.

Launching projects like the Mil Nader Wind Farm is expected to kickstart serious efforts toward harnessing this vast potential.

According to ISNA, Iran's unique geographical position makes it one of the Middle East's and the world's most promising regions for wind energy production.

Studies indicate the country's wind energy potential stands at around 30,000 megawatts, equivalent to a significant portion of Iran's total electricity generation capacity. However, only a fraction of this potential has been utilized so far.

Iran is home to several wind-rich regions ideal for wind energy production. Among these is Sistan and Baluchestan Province, known for its 120-day winds, making it one of the best locations for wind farm development in the country.

The Mil Nader Wind Farm in Sistan and Baluchestan is one of Iran's largest wind energy projects, with construction recently underway. The project, with a capacity of 600 megawatts and an investment of €447 million (82 trillion rials), is expected to become operational within 24 months.

Energy Minister Abbas Aliabadi described the wind farm as a key initiative to reduce the country's reliance on fossil fuels and achieve sustainable electricity production. He emphasized that the project will not only provide clean energy but also help reduce air pollution and combat climate change.

At the project's groundbreaking ceremony, Aliabadi noted that fossil fuels have dominated Iran's energy focus in recent years, but renewable energy is now a priority. He stressed that climate change is largely driven by excessive fossil fuel consumption and that expanding solar and wind farms can play a crucial role in mitigating this crisis.

Aliabadi announced that the Ministry of Energy has developed a plan to install 8,000 megawatts of wind turbines across

the country. This initiative aims to meet domestic energy needs while boosting the national industry and creating jobs through the involvement of local companies.

Iran now has the capability to domestically produce wind turbines, reducing foreign currency expenditures and enabling the transfer of technical knowledge to future generations for sustainable development. The Mil Nader Wind Farm, as one of Iran's most significant renewable energy projects, marks a major step toward reducing fossil fuel dependency and ensuring sustainable electricity supply. Beyond environmental benefits, the project is expected to have wide-ranging economic and social impacts, particularly in the development of regions like Sistan and Baluchestan.

Other regions with wind energy potential include Manjil and Rudbar in the north, where strong winds have made Gilan Province home to Iran's first wind farms, including the Manjil Wind Farm. North Khorasan and Razavi Khorasan provinces in the northeast, as well as Kurdistan, Azarbaijan, and Hamadan, also offer high potential for wind energy development.

Current wind energy capacity at 300 megawatts

Iran's current installed wind energy capacity stands at around 300 megawatts, a small fraction of its potential. Most of these wind farms are located in Manjil, Rudbar, Kahak in Qom, and Sistan and Baluchestan. Despite recent progress, significant development is still needed.

Long-term reliance on fossil fuels has historically limited investment in renewable energy. Additionally, the lack of technical infrastructure, such as transmission lines and advanced technologies, along with insufficient policies to incentivize investors, has slowed progress.

As a country with high renewable energy potential, particularly in wind energy, Iran has recently launched extensive programs to tap into these resources. With an estimated wind energy potential of 30,000 megawatts, wind-rich regions like Sistan and Baluchestan play a crucial role in this capacity.

Artisans of Minab, their craft traditions

Iranica Desk

Minab is considered one of the main hubs for handicrafts in Hormozgan Province and southern Iran. From ancient times to the present, pottery, wickerwork, traditional textiles, wooden crafts, woven fabrics, and traditional embroidery have been inseparable parts of the life and economy of the people in this region. Various types of wicker and pottery handicrafts have been transported from Tiab Port to the coast of Africa and Southeast Asian countries by knowledgeable sailors on sailing ships.



Cultural significance of local handicrafts

Local handicrafts hold a special place in the culture and traditions of the people, among which wickerwork is the most common craft in Minab, with almost all women and girls familiar with it, chtn.ir wrote. Wickerwork is an ancient and valuable art that is valued not only as an artistic activity but also as a sustainable source for producing various goods. It has been considered an integral part of the life and culture of the people in this area from ancient times until today.

Natural resources and craft development

Minab, with its rich natural resources such as palm leaves and native plants suitable for wickerwork, has created a favorable environment for the development and continuation of this art. This craft not only has economic and practical aspects but has gradually transformed into a cultural and artistic element. The skilled artisans of Minab, both men and women, produce practical and diverse products such as baskets, mats, fans, hats, and other everyday and decorative items using unique skills and distinctive patterns.

These products, made from completely natural and environmentally friendly materials, have always been well-received by locals and even tourists. The primary raw materials needed for wickerwork in the Bahmani village are palm leaves and a type of grass called *kash*, which is abundantly available in the gardens of Minab for artisans.

Factors contributing to handicraft emergence

The primary origin of wickerwork in Hormozgan Province is Minab, and the reasons for the emergence of handicrafts in this region include the abundance of raw materials in these large rural palm groves, the availability of a large workforce with unemployment during certain seasons, the strong market demand for the products of wicker weavers, and the export of goods to the Indian subcontinent and as far as the Horn of Africa through the historic port of Tiab. These factors are the main reasons for the production of handicrafts in Minab and the Bahmani village.

Tourism potential and national registration

Minab is rich in tourism potential and historical sites. The national registration of Bahmani village can help better introduce these potentials and optimize their use. This region has an abundant workforce and cheap raw materials, which can facilitate the production of local handicraft products. The goal is to preserve handicrafts and support the employment of artists.

Visibility and market engagement

A positive step towards highlighting the importance of handicrafts, culture, and art in this region is making this handmade art visible in domestic and global markets. This serves as motivation for local artisans to engage more in marketing, target-setting, establishing handicraft bazaars, conducting training workshops, organizing tourism tours focused on handicrafts, ensuring the con-

tinued development and promotion of wickerwork, and creating sustainable employment for artists active in this field.

Preserving heritage for future generations

Reviving this art and teaching it to younger generations can play a significant role in preserving and enhancing handicrafts. Bahmani village, with over 500 active artisans — representing more than one-third of the village's population — is a unique example that reflects the deep-rootedness of this craft in the fabric of life of the people in this community.

Economic stability and artisan support

The national registration of this village, along with programs to increase production and sales of products, will ensure job security and economic stability for its artisans as well as for those in neighboring villages. The active establishments in Bahmani village (including a permanent exhibition, a store, and a cooperative) have thus far undertaken the guaranteed purchase of artisans' products. Registering as the national village of wickerwork will facilitate branding for Bahmani handicrafts, allowing for modern presentation and packaging that can not only be sold in local and provincial shops but also create new markets across the country.

Modernizing handicrafts for global markets

Utilizing the knowledge of experienced individuals in handicraft marketing and collaborating with graduates in this field will enable the products of Bahmani wicker-

work to be updated according to the needs of foreign markets. With a fresh approach, these products can be exported under the village's brand to targeted countries, alongside the leading handicraft producers in the Middle East and Asia. This will not only generate foreign currency but will also ensure job security for those in this sector and the sustainability of handicrafts in the region.

Tourism and cultural attractions

Minab, recognized as a green area, is one of the most important tourist regions in Hormozgan Province. The presence of orchards, palm groves, and agricultural fields, along with proximity to the waters of the Persian Gulf and various cultural attractions such as the Thursday Bazaar, makes this county and Bahmani village a year-round host for both domestic and international tourists. Four tourism and accommodation complexes in Bahmani village, established with the help of the government and the community in the midst of mango and date orchards, provide tourists the opportunity to become familiar with the capacities and artisans of the region while also purchasing their favorite products directly from the producers.

Future plans for artisan welfare

Following the national registration of Bahmani village, the plans include ongoing consultations and negotiations with senior provincial and ministry officials for social security insurance for artisans, pursuing bank loans and special financial support for artisans, organizing tourism events focused on handicrafts, branding and promoting handicrafts and the cultural and artistic heritage of Bahmani village and Minab, and encouraging the use of handicrafts as alternatives to imported goods by updating products and making them functional for today's lifestyle.

A bright future for Minab's artisans

The future of the artisans in Minab looks promising as efforts to modernize and promote their crafts continue to gain momentum. By embracing both tradition and innovation, the artisans can secure their livelihoods while ensuring that their rich cultural heritage is preserved for generations to come. The combination of local craftsmanship, tourism, and strategic marketing can create a sustainable ecosystem that benefits not only the artisans but also the entire community. As Minab continues to attract visitors and showcase its unique handicrafts, it stands as a testament to the resilience and creativity of its people, highlighting the importance of supporting local artisans in today's global economy.



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Behind Afghanistan's fall

Americans train, pay for lawless bands of militias: **Report**

By Azam Ahmed
Journalist

INVESTIGATION

The Taliban were inching closer, encroaching on land that had once seemed secure, the American officer warned. Four of his men had just been killed, and he needed Afghans willing to fight back.

"Who will stand up?" the officer implored a crowd of 150 Afghan elders.

The people in Kunduz Province were largely supportive of the Americans and opposed to the Taliban. But recruiting police officers was slow going, and, by the summer of 2009, local officials and the American officer — a lieutenant colonel from the Georgia National Guard — landed on a risky approach: hiring private militias.

A murmur of discontent passed through the crowd.

"I don't think this is a good idea," an old man stood up and said, according to four people at the meeting. "We have seen this before. The militias will become a bigger problem than the Taliban."

Over the grumbling, a one-time warlord named Mohammad Omar sprung up and denounced the others as cowards. "I will fight the Taliban!" he shouted.



Taliban fighter stands guard in Dana, Kunduz, two years ago near a home adorned with colorful strips of cloth that are used by residents to denote where blood has been spilled. The building was the site of a massacre of young men by militia gunmen backed by the US and Afghan governments.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

The gathering in Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan, is not registered in any official history of the war. But people across the province say this seemingly unremarkable moment reshaped the conflict in ways that Washington has never truly understood.

For years, the Americans supported militias in the north to fight the Taliban. But the effort backfired — those groups preyed on the populace with such cruelty that they turned a one-time stronghold of the United States into a bastion of the insurgency. People came to see the militias, and by extension the Americans, as a source of torment, not salvation.

Mr. Omar, for example, who was known as the Wall Breaker, became the poster child of an abusive militia commander, marauding his way into local lore by robbing, kidnapping, and killing rivals and neighbors under the auspices of keeping them safe from the Taliban.

And he was just one of thousands of militia fighters unleashed in northern Afghanistan by the Americans and their allies — openly, covertly, and sometimes inadvertently.

The consequences came to a head during the chaotic American withdrawal in 2021. The North was expected to be America's rear guard, a place where values like democracy and women's rights might have taken hold.

Instead, it capitulated in a matter of days — the first region to fall to the Taliban.

President-elect Donald J. Trump has blamed President Biden for the messy end to America's longest war, vowing to fire "every single senior official" responsible for the disastrous exit. Biden, by contrast, blames the Afghans for surrendering to the Taliban so quickly.

"Political leaders gave up and fled the country," Biden said after the withdrawal. "The Afghan military collapsed."

But both renderings miss a more fundamental reason for the rapid fall: In places like Kunduz, a New York Times investigation found, the United States set the conditions for its defeat long before the Afghan soldiers laid down their arms.

For years, the Americans helped recruit, train, and pay for lawless bands of militias that pillaged homes and laid waste to entire communities. The militias tortured civilians, kidnapped for ransom, massacred dozens in vendetta killings, and razed entire villages, sowing more than a decade of hatred toward the Afghan government and its American allies.

The Afghan Army, already overwhelmed, recognized that it was defending a government with vanishingly little support. So, when the advancing Taliban offered Afghan soldiers a choice — their lives for their weapons — they lay down arms.

The regions plundered by Mr. Omar and other warlords were active battlefields during the war, mostly off-limits to outsiders. But more than 50 interviews, conducted in Kunduz over 18 months, showed how American support for the militias spelled disaster, not just in the province but also across the rest of northern Afghanistan. That state-sponsored misery was central to how the United States and its Afghan partners lost the north — and how, despite two decades and \$2 trillion in American money, Afghanistan fell.

Other Times investigations last year have revealed how the United States underwrote atrocities by Afghan forces and recklessly killed its own allies, essentially authoring its own defeat in Afghanistan.

The fall of Kunduz in 2021 was the final word on another unforced American error — its use of criminals to carry out operations against the Taliban.

"The militias shot at civilians and killed innocents," said Rahim Jan, whose mother, father, and two brothers were killed by Mr. Omar, which other villagers confirmed. With no other choice, he said, "We supported the Taliban because they fought the militias."

Even the Taliban, normally eager to boast of battlefield exploits, credit their victory in the province to American missteps. "The US empowered bandits and

murderers in the name of counter-insurgency," said Matiullah Rohani, a former Taliban commander and the current minister of information and culture in Kunduz. "But it only pushed more people into the hands of the Taliban."

Human rights groups, academics, and journalists have published numerous accounts of atrocities by militias. But the extent of the abuse, and how it helped enable the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan, is a story the Americans left behind when they abandoned the country three years ago.

Today, with the militias gone, the scale of their acts — in both human and political costs — is visible.

Previous accounts have blamed Afghan officials in the north for raising their own militias. But The Times found that the United States had recruited militias in Kunduz far earlier than was known, with a fallout far worse than American officials have acknowledged.

During its 20-year war in Afghanistan, the United States pushed an ever-evolving series of programs to recruit, train, and support local resistance to the Taliban. Some formally created armed groups under the auspices of the police, while other backing was ad hoc, with money and training provided here and there. In many cases, the Afghan government doled out American cash, giving militias the im-

matur of Washington's support. Almost all of the efforts were problematic. Militias soon grew too powerful to disarm. And while they did fight the Taliban, they fought one another even more, creating the kind of civil war turmoil that first helped bring the Taliban to power in the 1990s. Some Afghans were so disgusted by the predatory militias that they began to see the Taliban as their defenders and joined the insurgency.

One of the first militias was born in the Kunduz district of Khanabad, the brainchild of the Georgia National Guard officer desperate to beat back the Taliban. And one of the earliest efforts involved Mr. Omar, the Wall Breaker.

"There was no doubt in my mind that Mr. Omar was a leader in that community," said the now-retired officer, Lt. Col. Kenneth Payne, of the Second Battalion, 121st Infantry Regiment of Georgia's 48th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. "And I firmly believe that, at the time, he was saying all the right things."

Colonel Payne had not been sent to the north to recruit militias. He was there to mentor the police. But he had a wide remit and a big idea. He decided that activating Mr. Omar's group was worth the risk.

"It was almost like, 'If this works, if this is better for me, where I will get an advantage, then I will do it,'" he said. Instead, he wound up unwitting-

ly supporting the only group in the region less popular than the Taliban.

Wall Breaker

Months after the summer meeting, a Taliban fighter lay against the floor of a collapsed guesthouse. Outside, Mr. Omar, the newly minted militia leader, paced the street.

"Come out now, or I will blow the walls of this house down!" he shouted into a megaphone, as his men prepped mortars, witnesses said. "I am the Wall Breaker!"

The insurgent weathered round after round of mortars, each one collapsing nearby homes and terrifying residents with indiscriminate explosions.

Finally, Mr. Omar retreated with his men, fearful that the Taliban might send reinforcements. But on the way out of town, for good measure, his militia looted a local store and roughed up a few locals, residents said, actions that turned much of the community against him.

Mr. Omar had waged an all-day battle, blasting his way through an entire village, to chase down a single Taliban fighter. And still, somehow, his target had survived.

But the Wall Breaker moniker stuck. The name captured Mr. Omar's capacity for wanton violence, though not necessarily effectiveness.

And that early foray was among his least offensive, many locals say.

In another early mission, in a neighboring district, he stole so brazenly and abused so widely that residents cite it as the moment the entire area turned toward the Taliban. "He even took people's dogs," one recalled.

Mr. Omar, who had first taken up arms against the Russians decades before, used his renewed power to exact vengeance on his enemies from past wars and past decades.

Akhtar Mohammad said that his father, uncle, and brother had been rounded up and summarily executed, ostensibly for attacking Mr. Omar's convoy with a roadside bomb. But Mr. Mohammad denied that his relatives were involved in the bombing, which he said was just a pretext; the two families had feuded for three decades.

"Being part of a militia meant having the power and authority to settle scores," Mr. Mohammad said.

In Colonel Payne's estimation, "things went very well for a while." But his deployment ended soon after Mr. Omar's militia began, and the area "had a hard time after we left," he said.

"It really bothered me because I thought we had made a difference," he added.

The United States knew about the debacle unfolding in Kunduz. A diplomatic cable from the US Embassy in November 2009 emphasized the importance of controlling the militias. If left to their own devices, they could

“divide Afghan communities and spark additional violence,” the cable noted.

Two months later, the embassy seemed to confirm those fears: The government had no power over the militias, which fought among themselves and forced locals to pay them illegal taxes. The cable mentioned Mr. Omar’s role in the chaos but blamed an overzealous Afghan governor for hiring him. The diplomats seemed unaware that the Americans had empowered Mr. Omar themselves.

In 2013, four years after helping to arm the likes of the Wall Breaker in Kunduz, the United States left the north, handing control of security, and the militias, to the Afghan government. In the criminal free-for-all that blossomed, new commanders emerged even worse than Mr. Omar. They leveled villages and massacred families, and fought one another, too, over territory or perceived slights.

The Times spoke with dozens of families who had lost loved ones to those men and others, killings that tallied into the hundreds.

Forced conscription was common, they said. Men were killed for refusing to join one militia or another. Charges of supporting the Taliban were leveled against those who refused to pay taxes, and many were jailed.

“The militias would label anyone they didn’t like ‘Taliban,’ and then abuse them so much they had no choice but to join the Taliban,” said Mohammad Farid, a shopkeeper who said he was imprisoned for refusing to pay Mr. Omar a share of the proceeds from the sale of his store.

The Americans did not direct the abuse, but they funded the government with billions of dollars in cash and weapons, which officials then used to hire and arm the militias. As far as the villagers were concerned, this was an American project. And the Taliban increasingly seemed like a better option.

Shahd Mohammad, a tailor by trade, said he endured more than a year of beatings and abuse before he finally sold his shop in 2013, moved his family to another district, and joined

the Taliban.

For the next six years, he led a unit focused on fighting the militias in Khanabad.

“I went from living my life as a tailor to fighting on the front lines,” he said.

Taliban take advantage

President Ashraf Ghani took office in Afghanistan in 2014 and realized the militias were running amok. With the Americans by his side, he loudly promised to bring security to Kunduz by bringing people like the Wall Breaker under control. The effort proved disastrous.

Some militias, now maligned in public, soured on the government, former Afghan officials said. Some militias even switched sides, joining forces with the Taliban. Seizing the moment, Taliban commanders began secretly calling militia leaders, sowing distrust by telling them that the government viewed them as the enemy, according to Taliban officials and former Afghan officials with access to classified intercepts. They, like some others, spoke on condition of anonymity because they feared repercussions.

The psychological tactic worked. Some militias stopped fighting for the government, while others kept clashing with one another, clearing the battlefield for the Taliban. “The split between the militias was crucial for us,” said Heshmatullah Zalmay, a Taliban commander in Kunduz. Within a year of Mr. Ghani’s threat to curtail the militias, Kunduz was on the verge of collapse.

Mr. Ghani reversed course. His government secretly funneled the Wall Breaker and others like him more than \$100,000 a month to prevent the Taliban from taking over Kunduz City, the provincial capital, according to a former government official. It was too late. In August 2015, the Taliban stormed Kunduz City. Government forces and its militias fled until American air strikes and special forces could help them retake the city.

Far from drawing lessons from the failed militia strategies, the

Afghan government doubled down. To maintain order, Mr. Ghani’s government turned to a man even more ruthless than the Wall Breaker.

Haji Fateh

In a province shattered by ethnic and political divides, where factions of factions fought other factions, everyone agreed on one thing: Haji Fateh was the worst, most notoriously violent of all the militia commanders. Accounts of his medieval torture methods — branding people with hot metal rods, burying them alive, or keeping them chained in underground dungeons — still haunt the residents of Kunduz.

Mr. Fateh was widely seen as a scourge, a villain who killed innocents and charged their families to retrieve the bodies. He was also an ally of the Afghan government and, by extension, their American backers. Two former Afghan officials and several former militia commanders described years of government support for Mr. Fateh. “We had a complicated relationship,” said one former high-ranking government official in Kunduz. “When the district came under attack, we gave him money and weapons to fight.”

The transfers were conducted in secret, he said, because Mr. Fateh was a wanted man.

Before the Taliban emptied the prisons in Kunduz during their brief takeover, Mr. Fateh had been locked up for killing a Kabul Bank truck.

“We supported him, yes, but it wasn’t like he could come to the governor’s house,” the official said. How much the United States knew about the payments to Mr. Fateh is unclear. The money was given at a time when Afghan officials were under heavy pressure from Washington to take charge of their own security. The Pentagon did not respond to a list of questions about the militias. After fleeing prison, Mr. Fateh set down roots in the braided hillsides of Deh Wayran, an area that was largely free of the Taliban.

He operated from a torture castle, according to residents, and demanded ransom payments for his kidnapping victims — men like Haji Wazir, a contractor for the Americans who said he was nearly starved to death by Mr. Fateh.

Mr. Fateh’s criminal empire was built on cruelty and swept up entire communities as he waged a brutal turf war with a rival militia. Dozens died in scorched-earth battles between the two sides. Militias fired rockets and mortars into hillside villages and laced roads with bombs. They blamed the attacks on the Taliban, though they had no real presence there.

Almost nobody in Deh Wayran worried about the Taliban, residents said. On the contrary, they worried about the fight between two ostensible American allies. Gul Afraz lived with her family in the village of Dana, a small community of Tajik families numbering fewer than 150 people. Mr. Fateh planted roadside bombs that killed her son and two of her nephews, she said. Fearing that the village might take revenge, Mr. Fateh bulldozed every home there, villagers said, sending survivors fleeing.

Rival militiamen moved in, committing their own offenses, a tit-for-tat brutality that pushed more of the locals who remained to support the one group that wasn’t murdering them — the Taliban.

Within a year of Mr. Fateh’s arrival, the entire village had all but been wiped out. “There was no Taliban here at first,” Ms. Afraz said, “but I am so grateful they are here now.” Mr. Fateh operated with impunity, running checkpoints along the highway and extorting motorists of thousands of dollars a day, according to his former friends who remain in the region.

In a cynical twist, Mr. Fateh’s abuses made him ever more essential to the government: The more he pushed people into the arms of the Taliban, the more the government needed him to fight them.

The chief of police, the intelligence service, and the army showered him with money and munitions, according to the former government officials and militia commanders. Even the highly trained Afghan Special Operations forces were supporting him.

And because the Afghan government was practically insolvent, it meant the Americans were paying for it all.

“We tried to capture him many times,” said Sadat, a former special operations commander, who like many Afghans goes by a single name. “But then the government began to support him.” Prosecutors in Khanabad issued more than 100 warrants for Mr. Fateh’s arrest as complaints of robbery, extortion, and murder poured in. But the local authorities refused to act.

One prosecutor gave his federal counterparts in the Ghani government 150 case files bearing evidence of Mr. Fateh’s crimes, to no avail. Mr. Fateh was untouchable, and he knew it.

One day in 2020, the Shia owner of an ice cream store in Khanabad complained that Mr. Fateh should stop stealing his ice cream. Mr. Fateh had the shop owner beaten in the street. In response, Haider Jafari, a local Shia leader, said he had no choice but to confront him. Mr. Fateh responded by shooting him in the chest, wounding but not killing him.

Mr. Fateh then burned Shia homes in the town and ordered Mr. Jafari to flee. To reinforce his point, Mr. Fateh murdered his nephew, Mr. Jafari said. “We went directly to the governor, and he could not do anything,” Mr. Jafari said. “We began to support the Taliban after that.”

“We went directly to the governor, and he could not do anything,” Mr. Jafari said. “We began to support the Taliban after that.”

American withdrawal, fall of Kunduz

In February 2020, when the Trump administration reached a peace deal with the Taliban, the die was cast: the Americans were leaving.

The Taliban went from district to district, using elders to encourage the Afghan Army to lay down its arms. It was not much

of a negotiation. Thanks to the militias, the Taliban were stronger than ever, and there was no goodwill left for the government.

By the time the United States announced its timetable for the withdrawal in 2021, the Taliban had all but taken most districts in Kunduz.

Khanabad was different, in part because men like Mr. Fateh and Mr. Omar dug in.

The Taliban and the government traded control of Khanabad three times during the second week of June.

Biden met Ghani in Washington that month, insisting that the war’s final act had not yet been written.

“Afghans are going to have to decide their future,” Biden said. Mr. Fateh apparently did not share that optimism. Taliban officials say he tried to switch sides and even called a Taliban commander to offer his cooperation. But by then, the government was on its heels, and the Taliban saw no point in granting him quarter.

Aftermath

Some of the most notorious warlords and criminals who brought such misery to Kunduz — and ultimately did more to support the Taliban than defeat them — faded away without a final battle or trial.

Mr. Omar, the Wall Breaker, died of natural causes not long after the Taliban took over.

Haji Fateh fled to safety as the province fell and resettled in Iran, where he lives in a swanky home paid for by the money he earned brutalizing the people of Kunduz, according to one of his friends.

Mr. Fateh could not be reached for comment, but he welcomes visitors regularly for lavish meals or tea, said the friend, speaking on condition of anonymity out of fear of incurring his wrath.

Among his most frequent guests, the friend said, are former Afghan government officials, hoping to convince him once more to take up arms on their behalf.

The full article first appeared on The New York Times.



Bek Nazar, 55, stands by one of the buildings in the village of Dana that was destroyed during fighting between militias, killing his daughter, Baseera.



Mr. Omar, for example, who was known as the Wall Breaker, became the poster child of an abusive militia commander, marauding his way into local lore by robbing, kidnapping, and killing rivals and neighbors under the auspices of keeping them safe from the Taliban. And he was just one of thousands of militia fighters unleashed in northern Afghanistan by the Americans and their allies — openly, covertly, and sometimes inadvertently.



shababalahli.ae

UAE Pro League: Azmoun continues dazzling form as Shabab Al Ahli edges Al Ain

Sports Desk

Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun was on target yet again as Shabab Al Ahli defeated Asian champion Al Ain 1-0 in the UAE ADNOC Pro League.

A ninth victory in 11 games saw Shabab Al Ahli move atop the Emirati top-flight table with 29 points – one point clear of Sharjah.

Azmoun's tap-in from close range on Guilherme Bala's low drive went in off goalkeeper Khalid

Eisa's hand to take the Iranian's tally to eight goals in nine league games, leaving him third in the leading marksmen's chart following Al Ain's Kodjo Laba (14) and Syrian Omar Khribin (10) of Al Wahda.

Laba had the chance to add to his haul five minutes before the interval, only to see his effort from the spot kept out by Hamad al-Meqebaali.

Azmoun, who left Bundesliga outfit Leverkusen to join Shabab Al Ahli in

the summer, has been enjoying a prolific debut season in the Asian club football, contributing with a remarkable 17 goals and four assists in 19 appearances across all competitions.

The 30-year-old's most productive campaign came in the 2019/20 season, when he bagged 21 goals in 38 games, including 17 strikes in the league to help Zenit St. Petersburg lift the Russian top-flight trophy. He netted 19 goals the

following campaign to inspire the Russian heavyweight to a third successive league crown, while claiming the Player of the Season prize.

Elsewhere in the latest round of fixtures in the Emirati League, Iranian forward Shahriyar Moghanlou found the net twice for Ittihad Kalba but Al Nasr pulled off a sensational fightback, with Othmane Boussaid scoring the winner in stoppage time, for a 3-2 win.

2025 Karate 1-Series A:

Iranians collect double golds, one silver on Day 1

Sports Desk

The first day of the Karate 1-Series A event in Tbilisi, Georgia, saw Iranian contestants bag three medals, including double golds. Four-time Asian bronze medalist Fatemeh Sadeqi defeated Lo Sum Man of Hong Kong (41.4-40) in the final to walk away with the ultimate prize in the women's kata event on Friday.

Portuguese Natacha Fernandes and Mai-Linh Bui of France won the joint-bronze medals of the category.

In the men's kumite contests, an all-Iranian final showpiece saw Mahmoud Ne'mati overcome Mohsen Safarnejad for the gold in the +84kg weight class, with Turkey's Fatih Sen and Russian Kovalev Kirill – participating as a neutral athlete – sharing the third podium.

Elsewhere on Day 1, Greek girl Kyriaki Kydonaki came out victorious against Zeyna Gaballa of Turkey in the women's kumite +68kg final, while Oshiguchi Syota beat fellow-Japanese Ken Okamoto to the men's kata gold.

More than 1100 karatekas from 87 countries take part in the three-day opening event of the international karate season.

The Karate 1-Series A will be back in Larnaca, Cyprus, on February 14, with Salzburg and Kuala Lumpur also hosting the series throughout the season.



Iran's Fatemeh Sadeqi (R) poses with her women's kata gold at the Karate 1-Series A event in Tbilisi, Georgia, on January 10, 2025.

INSTAGRAM



Kyrgyz international Kojo joins Esteghlal

Sports Desk

Kyrgyz international striker Joel Kojo joined Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal on Saturday. The contract will see Kojo, 26, who joins from Dinamo Samarqand in the Uzbekistan Super League, commit his future to the Theran Blues until the end of the 2027/2028 season.

The financial terms of the deal remain undisclosed, but Dinamo coach Vadim Abramov said after the league's final game in December that the Kyrgyz international, who had a year left on his contract with the Uzbek club, would be released if "his \$300,000 asking price is met."

Kojo netted 11 goals and provided his teammates with four assists in 27 games across all competitions, as Dinamo finished eighth in the top-flight 14-team table.

Capped 23 times for Kyrgyzstan, the Ghana-born striker has 10 goals under his belt since making his international debut in June 2023 – including a double during a 3-2 home defeat against Iran in



AFC

the World Cup Asian qualifiers last November.

Kojo is the second winter signing for Esteghlal's South African head coach Pitso Mosimane, following Kenyan forward Masoud Juma, who has one goal in three games since joining the Blues as a free agent in November.

Kojo's first game for Esteghlal, which is 10th in the Iranian top-flight table with 18 points, will

come at home against Shams Azar on January 20.

The Capital Blues are eighth – last qualification spot for the knockout phase – in the West Zone's 12-team table of the AFC Champions League Elite with two games to spare.

Mosimane's side will host bottom-club Al Shorta of Iraq on February 3, before visiting Qatari outfit Al Rayyan two weeks later.

Alcaraz reaping rewards of Sinner rivalry

REUTERS – Four-times Grand Slam champion Carlos Alcaraz said having a rival like world number one Jannik Sinner was good for his game as it pushes him to be at his best every time he walks on court.

Alcaraz won the French Open and Wimbledon titles last year while Sinner claimed the Australian Open and U.S. Open trophies as the pair heralded a new era for the men's game by shutting out 24-times Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic. "When you face the best player in the world, you have to do something different, different preparation, or have a different mindset," said Alcaraz, who won all three of his matches against Sinner last year to improve his head-to-head record to 6-4.

"If I have a bad day against

Jannik, it's 99% that I'm going to lose. That's what is in my mind every time I'm going to play against him," the world number three added.

Alcaraz, 21, is bidding to become the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam at the Australian Open, which begins today. Reclaiming the top ranking is another goal for the Spaniard.

"The good thing for me is when I'm seeing him

winning titles, when I'm seeing him at the top of the ranking, it forces me to practice harder every day," Alcaraz told reporters at Melbourne Park on Saturday.

"In practice, I'm just thinking about the things that I have to improve to play against him.

"That I think is great for me, having him, have such a great rivalry so far, just to give the best of me every day."



GETTY IMAGES

Iran sympathizes with California fires victims, says ready to send aid

International Desk

Iran expressed sympathy for the victims of the huge wildfires in the US state of California, saying the Islamic Republic is ready to send humanitarian aid.

Iran's Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref in a post on his Instagram account emphasized that in today's world, the pain and suffering of one person is the pain and suffering of all.

Meanwhile, Head of the Iranian Red Crescent Society Pir Hossein Kolivand sent a message to his American counterpart Cliff Holtz and announced the organization's readiness to send relief aid to California.

Kolivand said the extent of the fire shows that tackling the crisis is beyond capabilities of local forces and requires global assistance, and the rapid spread of flames in the heart of nature

due is not only a threat to human life, but also to the future of the earth and the environment.

The Iranian official said that his organization is ready to quickly dispatch its specialized rapid response teams and relief equipment to help victims.

Six simultaneous blazes have ripped across Los Angeles County neighborhoods in California since Tuesday, which have killed at least 11 people and damaged or destroyed 12,000 structures, a term that includes homes, apartment buildings, businesses, out-buildings and vehicles. The toll is expected to mount when firefighters are able to conduct house-to-house searches.

No cause has been identified yet for the fires.

The speed and intensity of the blazes ravaging Los Angeles this week have put its firefighting infrastructure to the

test – and given rise to questions and criticism surrounding preparedness.

Hydrants ran dry in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood as it was ravaged by one of the region's five separate fires, while water shortages additionally hampered efforts elsewhere.

"We need answers to how that happened," California Governor Gavin Newsom wrote in a letter to the heads of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and the Los Angeles County Public Works.

Calling the lack of water and water pressure "deeply troubling," Newsom directed state officials to prepare an independent report on the causes.

Los Angeles fire chief Kristin Crowley has also said her city is hampered by a lack of resources.

US President-elect Donald Trump, who returns to the White House in just over a week, has seized upon the



A home is engulfed in flames during a fire in the Altadena area of Los Angeles County, California on January 8, 2025. **JOSH EDELSON/AFP**

drama to attack Democrats, launching a series of evidence-free broadsides

accusing Governor Newsom of a variety of failings.

IRGC unveils new underground 'missile city'



TASNIM

The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) unveiled one of its new underground missile bases, described as a "missile city", amid the Israeli regime's heightened escalation in the region and threats against the country.

The sprawling missile base, accommodating advanced Iranian projectiles, was unveiled by IRGC Chief Commander Major General Hossein Salami and Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, according to a report by Tasnim news agency late on Friday.

Broadcast by the national TV, the report on the footage from the subterranean facility said the base lodges such high-tech missiles as Emad, Qadr and Qiam which run on liquid fuel and that 90 percent of the other sections of the missile city were not shown for security reasons.

The advanced projectiles were used

in Iran's stunning missile attacks against Israeli military sites in military operations code-named True Promise 1 and 2 in April and October 2024.

Describing the missile base as a "dormant volcano deep in the heart of mountains," the national TV report said, "The volcano lying under these mountains can erupt in the shortest time possible."

During the tour of the missile facility, Salami praised the IRGC forces involved in the two anti-Israel attacks and rejected the enemy's mistaken belief that Iran's capability to produce missiles had been harmed.

"Every day, the number of systems and missiles is augmented in the far corners of this land. Maybe the enemy thought that our production power has stagnated, but the growth rate of our missile power is up to date," the IRGC chief said.

Earlier in the day, Salami asserted

that the Islamic Republic has more missiles than it can store, dismissing the enemy's propaganda about the weakening of Iran's armed forces following attacks by Israel on Iran and its regional allies.

Salami added that the IRGC Aerospace Force would unveil more new missiles and missile facilities in the near future.

The Armed Forces, including the IRGC and the country's Army, have been continuously enhancing their military hardware and combat readiness.

The forces have vowed to defend the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of the threats by the Iranian nation's enemies.

The Islamic Republic launched some 200 missiles at the Israeli entity's military, and espionage and intelligence bases all over the occupied territories on October 1 as part of Operation True Promise II.

The operation came in response to the regime's assassinations of senior leaders of the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance and a senior IRGC commander.

In the early hours of October 26, Israel targeted two Iranian border provinces, Ilam and Khuzestan, as well as Tehran. The country's integrated air defense system successfully intercepted and countered the aggression.

Iran has said it will respond to the recent Israeli act of aggression against the country and will not abandon its rights.

Iran, Russia discuss arrangements for Pezeshkian's visit to Moscow



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (L) shakes hands with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin during a meeting in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, on October 11, 2024. **president.ir**

National Desk

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian is scheduled to visit Russia on January 17 to meet his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin and sign a strategic cooperation agreement. Iran's Ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali held a meeting with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko to discuss arrangements for Pezeshkian's visit to Moscow.

Both sides called the first official visit by Pezeshkian to the Russian capital a historic event that will take the relations between the two countries to a new stage.

They also pointed to the importance of the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Treaty which is set to be inked between Iran and Russia during the visit as it will enhance the level of interaction between the two countries and facilitate bilateral cooperation.

The country's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in October that Moscow and Tehran intended to sign a deal which would include closer defense cooperation.

In 2001, Tehran and Moscow signed a long-term cooperation deal, officially known as the Treaty of the Foundation of Mutual Relations and the Principles of Cooperation. It was initially set for 10 years but was extended up until 2026.

Now, the two capitals are making final arrangements for the comprehensive partnership pact, which may determine their bilateral ties in all fields for the next 20 years. Iran and Russia are both subject to illegal Western sanctions. They have over the past years deepened their cooperation in various fields.

Iran has also signed a long-gestating 25-year cooperation accord with China as both countries remain under United States sanctions.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Shias, Hezbollah cannot ...

What deals do you think have been reached between Aoun, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, and how will this election affect Hezbollah's political future?

Page 1 >

Aoun is widely regarded in Lebanon as an exemplary military figure with a spotless record. He even fought alongside Hezbollah against ISIS and the al-Nusra Front in northeastern Lebanon, leading a military division in operations against these terrorist groups. In southern Lebanon, he previously commanded a brigade responsible for border security and never backed down against the Israeli regime, despite the Lebanese army's capabilities being incomparable to Israel's.

He is a patriot who aims for national unity. While the specifics of the discussions between Hezbollah, the Amal Movement,

and Joseph Aoun in their recent meeting remain undisclosed, speculations suggest that they centered around reconstruction, bolstering Lebanon's security, fostering government cooperation with resistance groups, and potentially cabinet appointments, including the selection of a prime minister. These discussions seem to have culminated in agreements, and subsequently, the representatives of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah in parliament cast their votes for Aoun, allowing him to securing a majority. Mr. Aoun is well aware that without the support of Hezbollah and Amal's MPs, the Christian bloc led by Samir Geagea would have thwarted his bid for the presidency.

What are your thoughts on how the Lebanese government, under Aoun's leadership, will engage with Shia fac-

tions and their supporters in Lebanon?

It's important to note that Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, along with their allied lawmakers, wield a majority in parliament and Muslims make up around 65% of Lebanon's population, of which around 45% are Shia. Aoun cannot afford to overlook this substantial segment of the population. That would be impossible. Ultimately, we hope that with the election of a president and the formation of a cabinet, the challenges faced by the Lebanese people will diminish, as they have endured severe hardships. We aspire for peace, stability, and security to be restored in the country. However, given Lebanon's proximity to Israel, it will always face various issues, including insecurity. Still, we hope that the election of a president will alleviate some of these burdens.

Creator of timeless masterpieces

Legendary composer Fereydoun Shahbazian dies at 82

Pezeshkian: Shahbazian's melodies exalted Iran's music

Arts & Culture Desk

Renowned Iranian musician, composer, and conductor Fereydoun Shahbazian died at the age of 82 due to respiratory issues on January 11, 2025.

Shahbazian, known as the father of pop music after 1979 Islamic Revolution, had been hospitalized in Tehran just a few days earlier, with his daughter Shiva announcing the news of his hospitalization on social media without revealing specific details about his condition.

His experience in radio music in the years before the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the early years of the 1990s, placed him in a position to initiate an influential movement in post-revolutionary pop music. That is why many consider him as the father of post-revolutionary pop music. He introduced some pop singers, especially Mohammad Esfahani, to the music community.

Born on June 11, 1942, in Tehran, Shahbazian's musical journey began early in life, inspired by his father, a student of the legendary Abolhassan Saba.

He honed his skills at the Tehran Conservatory of Music and joined the Tehran Symphony Orchestra at just 17 years old. Throughout his illustrious career, he took on various roles, including composing for the Farsi Orchestra and leading the Iranian National Orchestra from October 2016 to March 2019. Shahbazian made significant contributions to film scoring in the 1980s and co-founded the Music Council at Iran's national broadcaster.

His celebrated film scores include notable works such as 'Life' (1997),

'Hiva' (1998), 'The Last Supper', 'Innocence Lost' (2003), 'The Fourth Child' (2012), and 'Son of Fortune' (2012).

His collaborations with iconic Iranian artists, including Mohammad Reza Shajarian and Ali-Asghar Shahzadi, produced timeless pieces that remain cherished in Iranian culture. Some of his most beloved works include 'Jameh Tohi' ("Fill the Cup") with Shajarian, and 'Rubaiyat of Khayyam' with the narration of Ahmad Shamloo.

Condolences pour in Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian sent a message expressing profound sorrow over the loss of the great musician, calling it a significant loss for Iran's cultural and artistic community.

The president highlighted Shahbazian's status as a talented and creative master in the fields of culture and art, noting that throughout several decades of activity, he played a vital role in elevating the art of music in the country through impactful works rich in human and ethical concepts. His name will forever remain etched in the history of the culture and arts of this land.

In a message on Shahbazian's legacy, Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Abbas Salehi, expressed deep sorrow over the loss, stating, "His creative works added golden pages to the book of Iranian music. He was not only a creative artist but also a wise teacher and an inspiration for multiple generations of musicians."

Naderah Rezaei, Deputy Culture Minister for Artistic Affairs, remarked on Shahbazian's lasting impact, noting that his melodies including 'Jameh Tohi' have be-



● IRNA

come part of the auditory treasure of the Iranian people. She emphasized Shahbazian's unique ability to marry Iranian cultural elements with poetic and mystical themes in his compositions.

Unforgettable memories

Iran Daily reached out to several artists to share their memories of the late composer.

Farhad Fakhreddini, a composer and conductor, expressed his condolences to the family of Fereydoun Shahbazian, stating, "I have known Shahbazian for a long time, both during our collaboration at the radio and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, where we met on various occasions."

Fakhreddini shared fond memories of Shahbazian, acknowledging his significant contributions and timeless compositions for Iranian music. He lamented, "It is a great sorrow that this great composer is no longer with us."

Shahbazian was described by renowned singer, Hessameddin Seraj, as one of the greatest musicians of the contemporary era. Shahbazian, a master musician, played a significant role in Iranian music. Many of the timeless works by renowned singers and powerful orchestras were recorded by this maestro. Shahbazian meticulously supervised and directed the music recording process, taking into account the mood and well-being of the musicians and singers during

the rehearsals.

Salar Aghili, a renowned vocalist shared his personal connection, saying, "I had the privilege of working on numerous projects with him, including our recent collaboration for the World Cup in Russia, where we performed with the National Orchestra of Iran." He fondly recalled the many memorable concerts they performed together, both in Iran and abroad, which enriched his own musical journey.

Aghili praised Shahbazian's exceptional character, stating, "I learned so much from his ethics, demeanor, and kindness."

The vocalist highlighted Shahbazian's collaborations with other renowned singers, such as Simin

Ghanem and the iconic album with maestro Shajarian, 'The Rubaiyat of Khayyam.' He noted the inherent tranquility within Shahbazian's works, reflecting the master's inner peace.

Aghili admired Shahbazian's humble nature, stating, "He never sought attention or fame but pursued music with love until his final days, even amidst health challenges. He was always the first to arrive for rehearsals at Rudaki Hall." Aghili drew a parallel with maestro Iraj, who, at 97 years old, continues to passionately pursue music. He emphasized the significance of staying true to one's passion, which leads to the creation of valuable and influential artistic works.

Iran's tourism could be second largest industry after oil: VP



Arts & Culture Desk

Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref declared on Saturday that tourism has the potential to become the second-most significant sector in the country, following oil. Speaking to investors and private sector representatives in the tourism industry, Aref noted, "Tourism is one of the most effective economic sectors in

our country, and we have the necessary investments and resources inherited from our ancestors."

Aref emphasized the importance of Iran's vast cultural heritage, stating, "We have one million historical sites in the country."

He stressed that the cultural contribution of tourism is more significant than its economic value, asserting, "The cultural

perspective is more important than the economic view of this ministry's activities."

During the meeting Aref explained that each sector—cultural heritage, tourism, and handicrafts—could stand alone as individual ministries. However, they are combined in one ministry due to their interconnectedness.

He highlighted that tourism has been allocated at least 20% of

Iranian Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref (c) speaks at the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts in Tehran on January 11, 2025. ● president.ir

employment opportunities in national development plans since the third development plan.

Aref remarked on the importance of Iran's diverse cultural heritage, stating, "No part of the country can be deemed culturally or politically superior or inferior to another."

He shared a story of a foreign leader who expressed enthusiasm about visiting Iranian villages to experience local culture, describing it as "a significant opportunity for the country."

While acknowledging tourism's economic impact, Aref warned against viewing it solely through financial lenses, saying, "If we limit ourselves solely to economic aspects, it would be a great injustice to the

tourism sector and our cultural heritage."

He also addressed the issue of "Iranophobia," stating that misconceptions about safety in Iran often dissipate once tourists arrive.

Aref highlighted that many foreign tourists return with a changed perception of Iran, serving as informal ambassadors for the country.

He urged the government to facilitate private sector involvement, emphasizing that without the participation of the public and private sectors, achieving an 8% growth target outlined in the seventh development plan would be impossible.

In discussing the tourism workforce, Aref pointed to the need for improved training for tour guides, as some foreign tourists have expressed dissatisfaction with the conduct of certain guides.

He stressed that the government's role should focus on regulation and support rather

than direct involvement.

Prior to Aref's remarks, Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Reza Salehi Amiri highlighted the importance of infrastructure in tourism development.

He noted that private sector actors have initiated 2,700 tourism projects without government incentives, and he called for government support in creating investment opportunities. "The private sector is a cornerstone of tourism development," Salehi Amiri stated. He mentioned that there are currently 550 hotels under construction in Iran, requiring significant investment, and that the government aims to support projects that are 70% complete.

With Iran ranked seventh globally in tourism attractiveness, both Aref and Salehi Amiri's comments reflect a strong commitment to enhancing the country's tourism sector, aiming to leverage its rich cultural heritage for economic and diplomatic benefits.